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# Northampton task force suggests new stormwater fee for massive upgrades

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NORTHAMPTON — A special task force is recommending the creation of a new enterprise fund that would require nearly all property owners to pay a fee specifically for upgrades to the city's flood control and stormwater management systems.

The estimated bill for a single-family home would be either \$110 or \$144 a year, assuming the City Council approves one of the two models put forth by the Storm Water Ad Hoc Advisory Task Force. Commercial and non-residential property owners would pay considerably more, depending on how much pavement and other impervious surface is on their property. The Three-County Fairgrounds, for example, would pay close to \$20,000 a year, while smaller business properties such as Cooper's Corner in Florence would face a fee of \$400.

The fee, if approved, would go into effect for fiscal 2015, or July 1, 2014.

After three months of nearly weekly meetings in which the panel analyzed how to come up with a "fair and equitable" way to pay for the looming mandates and otherwise needed upgrades to the antiquated systems, the 11-member task force formally presented its report Monday to the City Council/Board of Public Works Conference Committee.

"A stormwater utility (also known as enterprise fund) is a logical and a rational way to think about funding," said Alex Ghiselin, a task force member. "Everybody in the city benefits from the stormwater system and everybody ought to share in the cost."

While acknowledging the fee will not be an easy pill to swallow for many in the community, the task force said it is imperative that public education begin immediately and that people understand how important the work is.

They also hope to explain to residents why it's necessary to create a dedicated revenue stream in the form of an enterprise fund to pay for these expensive fixes, rather than relying on a depleted general fund. Like similar funds in place for water and sewer, the money would be used only for stormwater and flood control work.

"It's hard to convince people to do what they don't want to do, but this stuff is essential," said Chris Hellman, a member of the task force and the BPW.

Committee chairman Emery Ford said the panel studied nine fee structure models before deciding on the two outlined in the report. While it researched exemptions, credits and whether to cap fees at a certain amount, the panel agreed that those were political decisions best made by the council.

Councilors will decide this fall whether to create an enterprise fund and determine the fee structure for its funding. The city currently pays for stormwater and flood control work out of its general fund, which would continue should the council reject the enterprise fund. The risk in doing that, some say, is that the general fund rarely has extra money for such expensive projects.

## Hydraulic model

The council will likely choose one of two proposed fee structures outlined in the report: one called "hydraulic acreage" and an alternative referred to as "equivalent residential unit," or ERU.

Though it's more complicated, a majority of the task force prefers the hydraulic model because it relies on more thorough engineering concepts to calculate runoff.

"The task force felt this refined model better approaches reality in terms of runoff for particular parcels," said city engineer James R. Laurila, a task force member.

The hydraulic acreage model calculates the fee based on stormwater runoff associated with three types of surfaces on a property: buildings, non-building impervious surfaces such as pavement, and pervious surfaces such as lawns, wooded areas and farms. The fee is a combined total of these three surfaces, with buildings costing the most and lawns the least.

Because of the large number and variety of residential properties in the city and the high cost of getting detailed information for each property, the task force is recommending averaging the acreage for one-, two- and three-family homes rather than plotting out such figures for each property.

Based on this averaging, single-family property owners would pay an annual fee of \$144, two-family property owners would pay \$125 and three-family owners would pay \$149.

Because of the way an average is taken of the various surfaces, owners of two-family properties would end up paying less, the task force said.

The fee for commercial and other large properties will be calculated on an individual basis using the formula outlined in the model, rather than the average. To give an idea of what this might cost individual owners, the task force estimated fees for a random number of businesses. Cooley Dickinson Hospital, for example, would pay \$17,100 under this model, while CVS on King Street would pay \$1,500 and Cooper's Corner in Florence \$400.

People who own undeveloped land of less than 50 acres would pay a fee of \$129 under this model, which aims to require every property owner aside from the city pay some sort of fee. The task force is recommending that all city property be exempt from paying the fee, reasoning that the money to pay these bills would come directly from the general fund and is a form of taxation. Nonprofits like Smith College and most state-owned property would be required to pay.

The hydraulic model, created by task force vice chairman Dan Felton, would result in 57 percent of the total fee coming from residential properties and 43 percent from commercial, industrial and tax-exempt properties. By comparison, residential properties pay about 83 percent of the property taxes in the city, according to the report.

#### ERU model

The equivalent residential unit model, referred to as ERU, is easier to understand. As the task force explained in its recommendation, "you pave, you pay."

Fees under this model would be determined by the average of the amount of buildings and pavement, or impervious surface. Essentially, this means that all single-family homeowners would pay the same annual fee of \$110, two-family owners would pay \$117 and three-family owners would pay \$149.

As with the hydraulic model, the fee for large residential properties with more than four units and commercial and industrial parcels would be calculated on an individual basis, not an average.

Commercial property owners would pick up more of the tab in this model, with about half of the funds coming from such owners. Task force member Rick Clark spoke in favor of the ERU model and its simplicity, which makes it easier to explain to the public and for the city to implement.

"It's a very simple formula we found to be fair and equitable," he said.

With a nod to the controversy that the new fee will cause among many residents, the task force said the council should consider credits and incentives, a cap on fees and other discounts.

"It's not going to be palatable at all," Hellman said. "But we need the money now. Right now. Two million is a down payment on a really big number."

#### Why necessary?

Task force members stressed that their recommendations focused solely on the fee structures and not the amount of money the city needs to raise. The estimates in the report would raise \$2 million a year, which is what the Department of Public Works estimates that it needs to cover the immediate obligations to the city's 70-year-old flood control systems on both the Mill and Connecticut rivers and a new stormwater permit from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Task force member James Dostal called the budget realistic for the next year or two, but he worries about future expenses and whether it's wise for the council to cap the fee.

"My problem is it may not be enough," Dostal said. "What are we going to do?"

DPW officials have been warning about the looming upgrades to stormwater and flood control systems for some time. A consultant's report last year put needed repairs at \$100 million over the next 20 years, though it remains unclear whether the city would actually undertake that much work.

One of the projects in the report is a recommendation to replace the city's flood control pumping station at the wastewater treatment plant on Hockanum Road.

The equipment in the current station, which diverts water under flood conditions, is antiquated and the parts are obsolete. Plant failure could cause millions of dollars in damage to a wide section of the city, including downtown, during significant storm events.

[Northampton Stormwater Task Force final report \(http://www.scribd.com/doc/152761830/Northampton-Stormwater-Task-Force-final-report\)](http://www.scribd.com/doc/152761830/Northampton-Stormwater-Task-Force-final-report)

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